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THE PROBLEM OF THE SIGMA XI ALUMNUS

Sigma Xi, we are taught, has one large purpose toward which all of its activities are directed, that is the extension of the bounds of scientific knowledge, and the deepening of the world's appreciation of learning already won. To accomplish this end the Society works in ways that are well known, and the means used, it is the confident belief of its members, have been productive of not a little good in the quarter of a century and more of their application.

The influence of Sigma Xi is a positive force for good in institutions where the Society has its branches. Beginning scientific investigators feel the stimulus of its contact; it is to them in many instances an incentive, and always it is a helpful friend, companion and counselor in their search for new knowledge. For men whose experience is greater, the Society has a welcome and intimate exchange of ideas on the part of those whose fields are related, and it provides a common basis for the encouragement of high ideals and sound attainments for workers in all branches of science. As it has developed in most institutions the Society has made its influence felt chiefly as a constant aid and source of inspiration to its active membership, and where it has chapters it serves to foster science among the undergraduate and graduate students, gives public lectures, and in general seeks to use all means available for promoting scientific activity.

At the present time every agency for good in all our land is giving searching thought to find its best sphere of usefulness and to discover how it may best meet the new needs and problems of a reconstructed civilization. The urgency for better conditions of life and well being in a world so lately harrassed and torn is now our most important consideration. At such a time and under such circumstances it is axiomatic that science and its devotees will strive for a wider measure of usefulness along any lines which are presented. In such endeavor Sigma Xi will surely be most active; for it is clearly a case in which by striving for society at large this Society will best follow out the policy embodied in its own purpose of promoting "zealous research."

It would appear timely therefore, to look about for opportunities either new or hitherto unstressed by means of which the Society may exert its influence more zealously for research in fundamental directions, may encourage its membership to greater activity, and

may awaken others to the fruits of scientific research. One opportunity not generally emphasized is to the alumnus who has left his college walls. In some chapters at least, no attempt has been made to reach out to the former members no longer connected with the institution, and no general means seems to be provided by the Society for interesting or encouraging those of its membership who may move from the sphere of influence of one chapter to that of another without actually becoming officially connected with the new institution. It is the purpose of this note to suggest greater "extra mural" activity on the part of the Society among its own former active members. The problem presented has a number of aspects, any one of which might provoke discussion; that in which the writer is especially interested is the case of the ex-member who does not wish to lose the influence of a valuable stimulus and incentive, but who goes to an institution which has no chapter of Sigma Xi—and usually in the nature of the situation can have none.

The story of the young investigator is usually somewhat as follows. As an undergraduate he shows strength in some line of science and gives promise sufficient to warrant encouraging him to take up graduate studies. Perhaps he may have even received a Sigma Xi election. As a graduate student he pursues some special line of research for which the institution he has chosen is especially well prepared, and more or less independently, but nevertheless under the stimulus of an older man he produces a thesis which may or may not have opened up to him problems suitable for future study leading on to greater scholarly achievement. His degree earned, he now becomes a member of some faculty where facilities for the particular research in which he formerly engaged are inadequate or even wanting, and all too frequently where facilities for any kind of research can be secured only with great difficulty. Also he has several new courses to work up and it is some time before he can give more than the merest fraction of his attention to the matter of research. It is at this time that he most needs just that which Sigma Xi has to offer. Many a man of only mediocre ability and attainments could by a little encouragement wisely given be stimulated to larger development and greater productivity. Who will say that the great in science do not serve as well by the inspiration and personal help they give to younger or less fortunate co-laborers, as by their own individual contributions to scientific knowledge? For the young investigator the first five years after he

receives his doctorate usually decides whether he is to be a "one-thesis" man, or whether he shall in some measure keep the promise of his earlier years and undertake new problems and follow out new leads as a greater offering to the science which he serves. This period in the life of an investigator is critical; and Sigma Xi can well afford to give serious consideration to a very real opportunity for promoting research and at the same time encouraging its own former members to a life of greater accomplishment.

In reference to this fairly typical case, it may be said by some that if the man in question has real genius he will surmount these difficulties and make his way in spite of them. Two things may be noted in reply to this: the Society may well interest itself in its geniuses, for it may be safely assumed that if they succeed without it, they would, encouraged by its kindly fellowship, make contributions of still more noteworthy character. But although we may cherish our men of special genius, our scientific advancement is not the product solely or even chiefly of their activity. Rather it is an advance over a broad battle line by a vast host of investigators. The fact that the last three score years have been an advance equal to that of all the ages prior is due in no small degree to the great numerical increase of those actively interested in pushing forward the frontiers of learning. Science will never come into its own as long as the rank and file of its adherents are not imbued with the spirit of productiveness. It is the duty of the Society to encourage the mediocre as well as those especially endowed. We can ill afford to await the accomplishments of genius.

Up to the present time it has been the experience of many graduate schools (in which, by the way, Sigma Xi has usually chosen to place its chapters) that the students who work for higher degrees come largely from smaller schools where research is less stressed and where even the name of Sigma Xi is almost unheard. It is the belief of the writer that an opportunity lies here which offers possibilities of almost limitless extent. Is it not the duty of an organization whose aim is to foster science to devise some mechanism by which it may reach its own members in the faculties of schools where a chapter is impracticable and through them to allow its influence to filter down to students now remote from its centers?

As to practical means for accomplishing the ends here discussed, only preliminary suggestions can be made in this place, but it is hoped that they will stimulate thought on the subject and perhaps be

the basis for working out better plans. It occurs to the writer that the territorial limits of chapters should be extended beyond the walls of their own institutions. The writer has had official relation with two chapters before coming to his present position and is now located at a distance of 30 miles from one chapter, 70 miles from two others, and 140 miles from still another; with any one of these six chapters (with the possible exception of one), he might be supposed to have some kind of official affiliation, and thereby continue to give his support and influence in behalf of the great ends of Sigma Xi. I am not informed, however, that the plan of organization of the Society takes cognizance of such cases. I believe it would be definitely helpful if in this institution the five individuals who belong to Sigma Xi (the heads of all our scientific departments are Sigma Xi men) might have some official relation to one of the neighboring chapters, although not of course the relation of an active member.

The writer also believes that a definite alumni organization of ex-Sigma Xi men would be an influence for good. It may prove impracticable to work out a scheme of affiliation with local chapters of the nature suggested here; but even in that case it ought not to be difficult to work out a plan for preserving the connection of small groups with an active, national alumni body. Either type of an affiliation, with a neighboring local chapter, or with the national alumni organization, or a double relationship to both a local and the national chapter (for they are not alternatives) might be preferred, but in any event such a group as ours, which may be used as an example, might hope to reap some of the benefits for which the Society was established. Contrasted with this plan, is not the present policy of Sigma Xi, as it practically works out, really one of *laissez faire* so far as it concerns newly elected members who leave the influence of their local chapter and do not become officially connected with another institution where there is a chapter. The writer believes that Sigma Xi should foster a national alumni consciousness.

Finally it has seemed to some of us that our students as well as ourselves would derive profit if we might form an officially recognized group organization, which we may tentatively call a Sigma Xi Club. In such a club, there could of course be no thought of electing members to the Society of Sigma Xi, but experience might show it to be desirable to devise some form of membership for students whose work would entitle them to it. In such a club those of us who have already learned to value the associations and ideals

of the Society would find encouragement and stimulus, and an opportunity would be offered us to perform in some measure for our students the services which the chapters render to the institutions in which they are established. It is the belief of some of us that this service could be better performed by a club officially affiliated with Sigma Xi than by a Science Club which is the only available substitute.

POSTPONEMENT OF THE 1918 CONVENTION OF THE SIGMA XI SOCIETY

It is the particular request of the Organizing Committee for the meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science during the coming Christmas holidays that affiliated societies, if possible, do not hold their ordinary meetings and conventions at the same time. The reason for this request lies essentially in the overcrowded conditions in Baltimore and its neighborhood. In compliance with this wish the executive officers of the Sigma Xi Society, in whose hands the question was left with power, have decided that the usual convention of the Society will not be held this year. It is hoped that a special convention may be held during the year 1919, possibly in the spring or summer, at which the ordinary business of the Society can be transacted, and where in particular, the elections for the new officers may be held. In the interim, in accordance with the constitution of the Society, the present officers will continue in office.

The postponement of the convention has seemed the less serious because in this period of intense activities in war issues on the part of practically all of its leading members, the Society has been obliged in a large measure simply to mark time with the larger plans it has in mind. These plans can be taken up so much the more effectively if we await the period of a return to more normal conditions.

JULIUS STIEGLITZ

President of the Society of Sigma Xi

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